A Model of Speaking Strategies for EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study intended to develop a model describing speaking strategies for EFL learners by taking into account the effects of learners' gender and proficiency on the application of strategies. Accordingly, this study was planned to have two main analyses, namely qualitative and quantitative. In this respect, 30 EFL learners' viewpoints were sought, and then, based on the elicited responses, a 21-item speaking strategy questionnaire was developed and given to 210 EFL learners. To select a subset of common responses and remove the redundant ones, factor analysis was applied, and then 7 components were extracted. These components, dichotomized on the basis of the offline/online notions or the time of speaking, comprised a model describing speaking strategies. Parenthetically, the study revealed that EFL learners' gender and level of proficiency do not affect their speaking strategy use.

Keywords: strategy, speaking, model development, speaking strategy model

1. Introduction

O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p.1) define learning strategies as "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information." As Hismangolu (2000) mentions, language learners are continuously looking for ways of applying strategies to deal with situations in which they face new input and tasks proposed by their instructors. Language learning strategies, as one of the important criteria in language learning, have received an increasing amount of attention not only in terms of their definition (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1992, 1993; Rubin, 1987; Stern, 1992; Wenden & Rubin, 1987), but also in terms of the factors affecting language learning strategies (Akbari & Hosseini, 2008; Oxford, 1989; Riazi & Khodadadi, 2007; Rahimi, Riazi & Seif, 2005; Yang, 1999).

Applied research on language learning strategies investigates effective language learning strategies in order to pave the way for the learners to learn as well as for the teachers to teach them how to apply those strategies by scrutinizing good language learners' behaviors (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1989; Su, 2005; Wharton, 2000).

To this end, this study intended, first, to develop a speaking strategy model which is one key aspect of LLS for EFL learners, and second, to investigate the differences between males and females regarding their use of speaking strategies as well as differences due to their proficiency levels.

1.1 Objectives and research questions of the study

It can be seen that an insufficient number of studies has been conducted in the area of LLS and in particular speaking strategy models. To fill this gap, this study intends to explore and develop a speaking strategy model for EFL learners. Therefore, the present study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What kinds of speaking strategies, if any, are used by EFL learners?

2. Does EFL learners' level of proficiency affect their speaking strategy use*?*

3. Are there any differences between males and females regarding the use of speaking strategies?

4. What model can be proposed for EFL learners' speaking strategy use?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language learning strategy

Language learning strategies have been classified by many researchers (Rubin, 1987; O'Malley, 1985; Oxford, 1990;; Stern, 1992). These taxonomies are presented as follows:

A. Rubin's (1987) classification of language learning strategies

Rubin (1987) categorized LLS into three main groups: Learning strategies, Communication strategies, and Social strategies. The following is a summary of his classification.

1. Learning strategies:
    1.1 Cognitive learning strategies
    1.2 Metacognitive learning strategies
2. Communication strategies
3. Social strategies

According to Rubin (1987), learning strategies include all strategies that are directly related to learning (cognitive) or those which indirectly involve the learning process (metacognitive). By cognitive he means clarification, practice, memorizing, and monitoring, and by metacognitive planning, setting goals and self management. Based on what Hismangolu (2000) states, communication strategies are used to handle communication difficulties and Social strategies are employed in conditions where individuals need to practice their knowledge.

B. O'Malley's (1985) classification of language learning strategies

Based on what O'Malley (1985) proposed, the following taxonomy for LLS can be presented.

1. Metacognitive strategies
2. Cognitive strategies
3. Socio-affective strategies

By metacognitive strategies, O'Malley (1985) means strategies applied to plan for learning and thinking about the learning process, monitoring production and comprehension as well as evaluation after the completion of an activity. Cognitive strategies involve the direct manipulation of learning techniques, e.g. repetition, translation, deduction, etc. The final group of strategies involves socio-affective strategies which deal with social transaction and activities.

C. Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of strategies

Oxford (1990) divided LLS into two main categories, each containing several sub-categories:

1. Direct strategies: 1.1. Memory
                        1.2. Cognitive
                        1.3. Compensation strategies
                        1.4. Communication strategies
2. Indirect strategies: 2.1. Metacognitive strategies
                        2.2. Affective strategies
                        2.3. Social strategies

As Oxford and Crookall (1989) pointed out, direct strategies can be defined as:

> Memory strategies are techniques to help learners store new information in memory and retrieve it later. Cognitive strategies involve manipulation or transformation of the language in some direct way such as note taking. Compensation strategies are behaviors used to compensate for missing knowledge.

Compensation strategies are used while speaking; however communication can occur in other language skill areas (p. 404).

They continue and elaborate on indirect strategies as:

Metacognitive or beyond-the-cognitive strategies are used to provide control over the learning process. Affective strategies are techniques to gain better control over their emotions. And finally, social strategies are actions involving other people in the language learning process such as questioning, cooperating with peers (p. 404).

D. Stern's (1992) classification of language learning strategies

Stern (1992) proposed five main language learning strategies:

1. Management and planning strategies
2. Cognitive strategies
3. Communicative-Experiential strategies
4. Interpersonal strategies
5. Affective strategies

Management and planning strategies help learners to direct their own learning. In other words, these strategies are those that individuals apply to set reasonable goals for themselves, choose appropriate methods and techniques, and evaluate themselves. Cognitive strategies, as it is implied, are directly related to learning and requisite problem solving and analysis procedures such as clarification, memorization, etc. The purpose of communication-experiential strategies is to direct the overflow of communication (Stern, 1992). Moving on, interpersonal strategies are the ones used by students to evaluate their own performance. Finally, affective strategies are used by learners to deal with their emotional problems (Stern, 1992). Although different researchers have proposed these taxonomies, most of them come up with more or less the same

classification. Moreover, the taxonomies proposed represent very general LLS. No study focused on the taxonomy of speaking strategies specifically.

2.3 The importance of language learning strategies in language learning and teaching

According to Oxford (1990), the importance of LLS is because of the fact that language learning strategies help learners to develop communicative competence while the instruction of LLS by teachers can help individuals apply more effective learning strategies.

Kinoshita (2003) expresses his view that language learning instruction is a teaching approach that aims to raise learner awareness of learning strategies and provide learners with systematic practice, reinforcement and self monitoring of their strategy use while attending to language learning activities. Moreover, as reported by Lessard-Clouston (1997), teaching LLS to learners plays an important role in teaching and learning a language. The emphasis placed on LLS instruction is to the extent that those instructors who teach learners and train them to be better strategy users are considered more efficient and more highly regarded teachers.

Language teachers, as the instructors of LLS, should be aware of their indispensible role in the learning process. And as Hismangolu (1997) states:

> The language teacher aiming at training his students in using language learning strategies should learn about the students, their interests, motivations, and learning styles. The teacher can learn what language learning strategies students already appear to be using, observing their behavior in class.

In conclusion, we can say that as Haung (2006) claims, non-native speakers believe that speaking in the target language is one of the most

demanding and crucial tasks in their everyday life. Furthermore, Ferris and Tagg (1996) state that even highly proficient language learners are not satisfied with their speaking skills and are looking for chances to improve their speaking ability. Therefore, because few studies have been done on speaking skills, there is a real need to conduct research in this area.

3. Method of the Study

An important qualitative method that has been employed regularly in educational and social research is Grounded Theory, which "is designed to develop a theory based on the field data collected in a study" (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006, p. 33). In the same direction, Mackey and Gass (2005) state that Grounded Theory "involves developing theory based on, or grounded in, data that have been systematically gathered and analyzed" (p. 179). Grounded Theory, which is inductively derived from the phenomenon, represents and meets four criteria: fit, understanding, generality and control (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Considering the aforementioned points, the following sections (participants, instrument, data collection and analysis procedures) will be identified.

3.1 Participants

The number of participants involved in the study is as follows:

Phase 1: In total, 30 (20-31) adult participants studying at Shiraz University Language Center were selected and interviewed (10 elementary learners, 10 intermediate and 10 advanced).

Phase 2: At this phase, 210 participants were selected from two language institutes, namely, Shiraz University Language Center and Bahar Language Institute. They (both male and female) were from three proficiency levels: beginner, intermediate and advanced.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Interview

Qualitative interviews may be used as the main strategy for data collection, or in conjunction with other methods such as observation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Patton (1990) discusses three types of qualitative interviewing: 1) informal, conversational interviews; 2) semi-structured interviews; and 3) standardized, open-ended interviews.

To this end, the first instrument utilized in this study was a semi-structured interview, which is the primary method of data collection in grounded theory (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006). Through the interviews, the researchers tried to extract the strategies used by the learners. Some questions and hints were given during this session to explore the strategies both directly and indirectly. The questions of this phase included the strategies that were presented for language learning in the literature review and the taxonomies developed by Oxford (1990), O'Malley (1985), and Hung and Naerssen (1987 as cited in Riazi & Khodadadi, 2007).

3.2.2 Questionnaire

 A researcher-made questionnaire (appendix A) consisting of 21 items was extracted from the interview data. The items of the questionnaire included speaking strategies that adult EFL learners apply and use while speaking.

3.2.3 Reliability and validity of the instruments

The reliability of the questionnaire was computed through Cronbach's Alpha. The results show an acceptable reliability index of 0.704 for the questionnaire. As for validation, exploratory factor analysis was run. The participants of the study, comprising 70 elementary, 70 intermediate and 70 advanced students from Shiraz University and Bahar institutes filled out the questionnaire. Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin's Measure of sampling adequacy revealed a good value of 0.66, and Barlette's test of sphericity's result was significant, yielding an acceptable value ($p < 0.05$). Accordingly, seven factors were extracted for the 21 items.

3.3 Data collection procedure

The data needed for this study were collected in 3 distinct phases:

Phase 1: Through an interview, the speaking strategies used by 30 participants (10 from each proficiency level, namely, elementary, intermediate and advanced) were studied. The questions were predetermined since the interview was goal-oriented, making the strategies used by the learners known as well as revealing the commonalities among the students and ignoring those rare strategies used by special participants. Additionally, in order to reduce misconceptions between the researchers and interviewees, the interview was done in Persian, but technical words and expressions were used in English.

Phase 2: The researchers transcribed and then codified the strategies, benefiting from three types of codification, namely, open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The outcome was a speaking strategy model which will be presented later.

Phase 3: A questionnaire on speaking strategy was developed based on the results obtained in the second phase. This researcher-made questionnaire was given to 210 participants to determine to what extent they endorse each strategy. Moreover, the study intended to scrutinize the possible effects of gender and proficiency level, which are two determining variables in any educational setting, on the use of speaking strategies.

3.4 Data analysis procedure
3.4.1 Qualitative analysis

Analysis begins with the identification of the themes emerging from the raw data, a process sometimes referred to as open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). During open coding, the researcher must identify and tentatively name the conceptual categories into which the observed phenomena will be grouped. The goal is to create descriptive, multi-dimensional categories which form a preliminary framework for analysis.

The next stage of analysis involves the re-examination of the categories, technically referred to as axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, selective coding is the process of selecting the central or core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Upon analysis of the data, the researchers of the current study benefited from Strauss and Corbin's (1998, as cited in Nouhi, 2010) model, stating that the heart of data analysis in grounded theory is based on three types of coding procedures: open, axial, and selective. The participants' comments were first transcribed. Then the transcribed data were codified according to the above coding strategies.

3.4.2 Quantitative analysis

Besides utilizing descriptive statistics to present a profile of the speaking strategies used by the participants, two inferential statistical analyses were run: one independent sample t-test to determine the differences between the participants' use of strategies regarding their gender (males and females) and one-way ANOVA to reveal the effect of participants' levels of proficiency (beginner, intermediate and advanced) on their speaking strategy use.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Qualitative analysis

4.1.1 Codification of the data

*Step 1: Open Coding***:** Written data from field notes or transcripts were conceptualized line by line. The researchers came to a very wide range of codes in this step out of which some were reduced later.

Step 2: Axial Coding: The pieces of data related to the same topic were brought together and some categories were formed and came to surface. The first category that appeared to be salient in the participants' statements was the interference of their mother tongue, that is, Persian, in speaking English. Several points were repeatedly mentioned by the

participants about what they did while they were speaking. Another strategy that almost all learners repeatedly elaborated on was how important accuracy was in their speech. Some tried to pay more attention to accuracy than fluency while to others, communication played the most important role in their speaking. Although some learners did not pay attention to what would happen if they made mistakes in class, the rest were afraid of making mistakes, especially in mixed classes. What learners do when giving lectures is another issue that was important. Some preferred to write what they wanted to say first and then present it. Some benefited a lot from body language. Most learners are willing to develop their speaking abilities and thus some measures were taken to this end, such as memorization. On the other hand, there were some learners who preferred giving summaries instead of memorizing dialogs, while some did both summarizing and memorizing. Another group of strategies includes creating a pseudo-native context that is, listening and watching English programs and trying not to speak the mother tongue even after the class. Although this strategy is difficult to put into practice in Iran, since English is not the second language and even as a foreign language is not so much welcomed to be used frequently, the above mentioned strategy is used by some EFL learners of English. Paying attention to what others say, correcting their errors and trying to use good expressions, words or structures were other techniques employed by the learners.

To conclude step 2 of the codification stage, it can be said that altogether, there are 7 distinct categories of learner strategies:
1. Interference of mother tongue
2. Error correction
3. Accuracy
4. Body language and substitution
5. Educational-aid methods and instruments
6. Memorization and summary
7. Sensitivity toward chances

Step 3: Selective Coding: The categories which were derived from the previous stage were divided into 2 broader categories, namely "on-line strategies" and "off-line strategies." The notions on-line and off-line were chosen in relation to the time of speaking. By on-line (mostly unconscious) strategies the researchers intended to reveal those strategies that were used at the time of speaking. By contrast, off-line (mostly conscious) strategies were the ones applied by learners in order to develop their speaking abilities but not necessarily at the time of speaking. Table 1 presents the results of these codification steps:

Table 1. Summary of the codification results

Theme	Category	**Sample**
1) On-line strategies	1.1.Interference of mother tongue	1.Whenever I want to speak or write in English, first I think in Persian, then I translate into English 2. I try to start speaking or writing without preparation so I won't have time to think about it in Persian. 3. If I have enough time, first I write my sentences, then I translate them and finally I use them in my English speaking.
	1.2.Error correction	1. If I become aware of my mistakes, I attempt to correct them myself. 2. I am sure that my teacher will correct me so I don't try to correct my mistakes. 3. I don't pay attention to slips of tongue; I just correct obvious grammatical or lexical errors 4. When others speak, I check them and their possible errors, and then I correct them in my mind.
	1.3. Accuracy	1. Accuracy is so important to me. Every time that I speak, I pay a lot of attention to grammatical points. 2. I try to communicate with others and express myself even if I cannot use correct grammar. 3. I'm worried about making mistakes all the time, especially in mixed classes.

Theme	Category	**Sample**
	1.4. Body language and substitution	1. I think when I use gestures at the time of speaking, I can communicate better. 2. I use gestures only when I am speaking to a person whose English is better or worse than me. 3. When I don't know a word during speaking, I use the Persian equivalent so that my teacher will help me. 4. If I forget a word, I try to explain it in English or use its synonyms. 3. Whenever my mind blocks when I forget a word, I stop speaking till my teacher or my friends help me.
2) Off-line strategies	2.1. Educational-aid methodsand instruments	1. I watch films or listen to English news 2. I like music; therefore, I prefer to listen to English music. 3. Reading books or magazines in English will help me learn new words and structures. 4. Whatever I hear, I try to repeat irrespective of whether it is from a film, piece of news, song or even live speaking. When I repeat, I learn both the pronunciation and the usage of the word or the structure. 5. I try to use dictionaries or other references to improve my pronunciation and diction.
	2.2. Memorization and summary	1. Most of the time I memorize dialogs, and then I use the words and/or sentences in my speaking in real situations. 2. First I memorize dialogs, and then I try to give summaries of the dialogs in my own words. 3. I never memorize because everything will be forgotten; I just try to learn and comprehend, and to do so I give summaries all the time.
	2.3. Sensitivity toward chances	1. After class, if it is possible I speak English with my teacher and classmates. 2. Whenever I see a foreigner or a person whose English is better than me, I start a conversation in English and talk with them. 3. I look for chances to learn new words and structures. So, when my teachers and those who are proficient in English speak, I care about what they say in order to achieve my goal, which is improving my knowledge of English.

As presented in Table 1, there are two themes selected for the strategies applied by the learners: on-line and off-line strategies. These two notions are identified based on the time of speaking, that is, on-line strategies are those strategies applied at the time of speaking, while off-line strategies are those used either before or after speaking. The former (on-line strategies) consists of four categories: interference of mother tongue, error correction, accuracy, body language and substitution. The latter includes three categories: educational-aid methods and instruments, memorization and summary, and sensitivity toward chances.

4.2 Quantitative analysis

The instrument utilized at this stage was a 21-item questionnaire developed by the researchers based on the participants' interviews. The learners responded to the statements by selecting from five options, namely, 'strongly agree,' 'agree,' 'have no idea,' 'disagree,' or 'strongly disagree.' The items of the questionnaire were examined in terms of their frequency of selection so as to determine the extent to which the participants endorse the statements. To provide a more succinct and comprehensible pattern of the participants' answers to the questionnaire, the first two alternatives ('strongly agree' and 'agree') and the last two ('disagree' and 'strongly disagree') were combined. Moreover, the items of each factor were merged, too.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of factors

Factor	Percentage		
	SA+A	NI	D+SD
Factor 1: interference of mother tongue	45.25%	14.8%	40%
Factor 2: error correction	65.8%	16.5%	16.2%
Factor 3: accuracy	53.5%	10.4%	35.3%
Factor 4: body language and substitution	79.7%	10.5%	9.7%
Factor 5: memorization and summary	69.3%	13.2%	17.3%
Factor 6: educational –aid method	67.3%	15.5%	16.6%
Factor 7: sensitivity toward chances	71%	12.2%	16.6%

As Table 2 illustrates, more than 50% of EFL learners agreed with all factors except the first. This means that the EFL learners of the observed context are strategic and endorse the strategies extracted from the qualitative design. Among the strategies applied by the learners, it is observed that body language and substitution are the ones that are most frequently used (79.7%).

Regarding the first factor, it was revealed that 45.25% of the participants agreed with it, while 40% disagreed and the rest had no idea. Accordingly, we can come to the conclusion that the learners' mother tongue interferes with the speaking process as translation from one's mother tongue into English plays an important role in their speaking. In the studied context, this may be due to the fact that English is considered a foreign language; therefore, they have no contact with native speakers. Learners of English communicate with each other in Persian almost exclusively except in English classes. This issue has made speaking English a challenging task which requires learners to shift to their mother tongue as a means of facilitating both the perception and production of the language. The other possible cause can be the unfamiliarity of the learners with strategies involving learning English through English. On a more positive note, less than 50% of the participants use this strategy while speaking because interference is a serious impediment to the speaking process.

4.2.1 Learners' level of proficiency and their speaking strategy use

After the collection of the data through the instruments outlined previously, the collected data were analyzed inferentially. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the participants' level of proficiency on their speaking strategy use. It is important to restate that the learners' levels of proficiency were determined by the institutes because they are highly rigorous with regard to placing language learners into different levels.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the effect of participants' level of proficiency
on their speaking strategy use

Variable/level of proficiency	Mean	Out of	Std. Deviation	N
Elementary	76.74	105	7.32	70
Intermediate	70	105	7.38	70
Advanced	76.68	105	7.27	70
Total	74.37	105	7.32	210

As can be seen in Table 3, the means obtained for different proficiency levels are as follows: Beg. = 76.74; Inter. = 70; and Adv. = 76.68. Moreover, the obtained means indicate that beginners and advanced learners make use of speaking strategies more than intermediate learners. This might be due to the fact that elementary learners are eager to learn a new language to experience a new world. After a period of time, beginners gradually become intermediate learners, and they come to understand that being proficient in another language is not as easy as it was assumed, and consequently, realize that their goal cannot be achieved in a short time. As such, some language learners may become disappointed. This issue results in less motivation on the part of the learners, which in turn leads to fewer attempts to use strategies and techniques when learning the target language. As intermediate learners slowly progress through and eventually overcome this period, they regain their lost motivation. This enthusiasm may be the outcome of the fact that learners' knowledge of vocabularies, grammar, and expressions has improved, so that they face fewer problems in producing utterances in the target language. This helps the students use more strategies and use them more often, thus enhancing their proficiency, particularly their speaking skills.

In general, one can come to the conclusion that since all the means for the three levels of proficiency are above 50% of the whole score (50%=52.5, 76.74>52.5, 70>52.5, 76.68>52.5), the sample participants are relatively wise and good users of speaking strategies.

In order to determine the effect of the learners' level of proficiency on their speaking strategy use, one-way ANOVA was run with a confidence interval of 0.05. The results obtained from these computations are presented in Table 4. Going through the table, one can see no significant difference between the three groups of learners (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) in their speaking strategy use [Sig .31> .05; df = 2; F = 1.17].

Table 4. One-way ANOVA results on the effect of proficiency levels on speaking strategy use

scores	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	126.06	2	63.03		
Within Groups	11121.1	207	53.72	1.17	.31
Total	11247.16	209			

4.2.2 Gender and EFL learners' speaking strategy use

The other issue investigated in this study was whether EFL learners' gender affects their use of speaking strategies or not. To this end, the first step was determining the descriptive statistics for both genders with regard to their use of speaking strategies. As shown in Table 5, it seems that males are somehow better users of speaking strategies. The obtained mean is 76.08 for males while 74.96 for females.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the effects of gender on speaking strategy use

Variable/gender	Mean	Out of	Std. Deviation	N
female	74.96	105	7.62	105
male	76.08	105	7.77	105
total	75.52	105	7.7	210

Moreover, an independent sample t-test was run in order to see whether the aforementioned difference in Table 5 was significant. The output of this stage of analysis is shown in Table 6. As Table 6 presents,

the significance is .29, which is much higher than the probability value [Sig. >.05; t = -1.5]. This means that there is no significant difference between male and female EFL learners with regard to their use of speaking strategies.

Table 6. Independent sample t-test results regarding gender and speaking strategy use

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Male	105	74.96	7.62		
Female	105	76.08	7.77	-1.5	.29

4.3 Discussion
The ultimate goal of the present study was developing a model describing speaking strategies for EFL learners. Although there have been lots of studies conducted on language learning strategies, there seems to be lack of research on the speaking strategies used by learners. To this end, the speaking strategies applied by EFL learners were studied to develop a relevant model. It was revealed that most EFL learners use strategies for two main reasons: to help them convey themselves more effectively at the time of speaking and to develop their oral production ability before or after the time of speaking. Overall, these strategies can be grouped into two distinct categories: on-line and off-line strategies. Furthermore, these two themes consist of different sub-categories. Interference of mother tongue, error correction, accuracy, body language and substitution can be subsumed under on-line strategies, while memorization and summary, sensitivity toward chances and educational-aid methods and instruments can be labeled off-line strategies. To put it another way, the model developed for speaking strategy use in this study includes two themes and seven categories as explained above.

With regard to the effect of gender on strategy use, this study showed no significant differences between males and females. Therefore, the results of the present study are not consistent with those of several other studies, reporting greater frequency of strategy use in females than

in males (e.g. Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Kaylani, 1996; Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Green and Oxford (1995) concluded that the use of LLS attributed to gender difference might refer to the inherent disparities between men and women. As suggested by Oxford (1989), the gender difference might be related to women's greater social orientation and stronger verbal skills. The findings of the study by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) also support the idea that females are better than males both in second and first language acquisition. However, some findings revealed that males employed more strategies than females (Wharton, 2000). The inconsistency of the findings of the present study may be due to context difference. In the Iranian context, regardless of learners' gender, English is considered a foreign language which all EFL learners are taught in a similar way. In addition, it seems that learners' attitudes toward this language are highly similar. The other noteworthy point is that this study is not the only one demonstrating inconsistency with other studies; Wharton (2000) proved that male learners employ LLS more. Moreover, Oh (1996) and Park (1999) came to the same conclusion as the present study, that is, there is no difference in LLS use regarding learners' gender.

Although numerous studies about L2 learning strategies have been rooted in the distinction between male and female LLS use in general and speaking strategies in particular, there exists a large amount of research on the relationship between strategy use and L2 proficiency. Some have used actual proficiency test scores (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Green & Oxford, 1995; Phillips, 1991), while others have used proficiency self-ratings (Wharton, 2000). Most researchers agree that more proficient learners employ a wider range of strategies more efficiently than less proficient learners (Green & Oxford, 1995; Kaylani, 1996; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Oxford, 1996; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Park, 1997; Philips, 1991). Moreover, Yang (1994) stated that perceived proficiency levels have a significant effect on the students' use of learning strategies. The better students perceive their language proficiency, the more they

use various learning strategies to assist them in learning English. It seems that language proficiency is commonly recognized as a determinant of strategy use by more and more studies.

However, regarding the results of the current study, there was no significant difference in the use of speaking strategies among the learners of the 3 levels of proficiency, as the one-way ANOVA indicated. The only point that is worth mentioning here is that the obtained mean for intermediate learners was the lowest, whereas for the elementary ones it was the highest, though this is at the level of descriptive statistics. This result may be due to the fact that learners at the elementary and advanced levels were more motivated than the intermediate participants of this study.

Comparing issues discussed above with the findings of the present study regarding the level of proficiency and strategy use, it is found that results of this study are not consistent with other studies conducted in this regard. As emphasized above, this inconsistency may account for context differences as Brown (2000) states "Every learner is unique. Every teacher is unique. Every learner-teacher relationship is unique and every context is unique" (p. 14).

5. Conclusions

As the results in the previous section revealed through the interview and questionnaire and the results of data analysis (t-test and one-way ANOVA), the researchers have been able to conclude that in general most EFL learners take advantage of speaking strategies. Generally speaking, by looking at the results obtained in this study, the following conclusions can be reached in response to the research questions posed at the beginning:

1. What kinds of speaking strategies, if any, are used by EFL learners?
Generally, the various strategies applied by them can be categorized into two main groups: on-line and off-line strategies. By on-line strategies it

is meant those strategies that are used at the time of speaking and by off-line the researchers intend to show strategies used to develop learners' speaking ability not necessarily at the time of speaking. On-line strategies consist of interference of mother tongue, error correction, importance of mistakes and body language and substitution. Off-line strategies on the other hand, include educational-aid methods and instruments, memorization and summary, and sensitivity toward chances.

2. Does EFL learners' level of proficiency affect their speaking strategy use?

Running one-way ANOVA, it was revealed that the level of proficiency does not affect speaking strategy use significantly, though at the level of descriptive statistics males are more strategic than females. This finding is inconsistent with the findings of other researchers (e.g. Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Green & Oxford, 1995; Kaylani, 1996; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Oxford, 1996; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Park, 1997; Phillips, 1991; Wharton, 2000) which proved that proficiency level affects language learning strategy use.

3. Are there any differences between males and females regarding speaking strategy use?

The outcome of the independent sample t-test indicated that gender is not a distinctive factor in employing speaking strategies by EFL learners. The results of this portion of the study support the findings of some researchers such as Chang (1990) and Chou (2002) that found no significant differences between males and females in their use of language learning strategies. However, the findings of the present study are not consistent with those of several other studies that have reported that female learners use strategies with greater frequency than male learners (e.g., Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Kaylani, 1996; Mohamed Amin, 2000; Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

4. What model can be proposed for EFL learners' speaking strategy use?
Figure 1 manifests the model of speaking strategy use for EFL learners.
As depicted in the Figure, the speaking strategy model includes two main
categories: off-line and on-line strategies. Off-line strategies are
educational-aid methods and instruments, memorization and summary,
and sensitivity toward chances. On-line strategies are those strategies
employed at the time of speaking and include interference of mother
tongue, error correction, accuracy and sensitivity toward chances.

Figure 1. Speaking strategy model used by the EFL learners
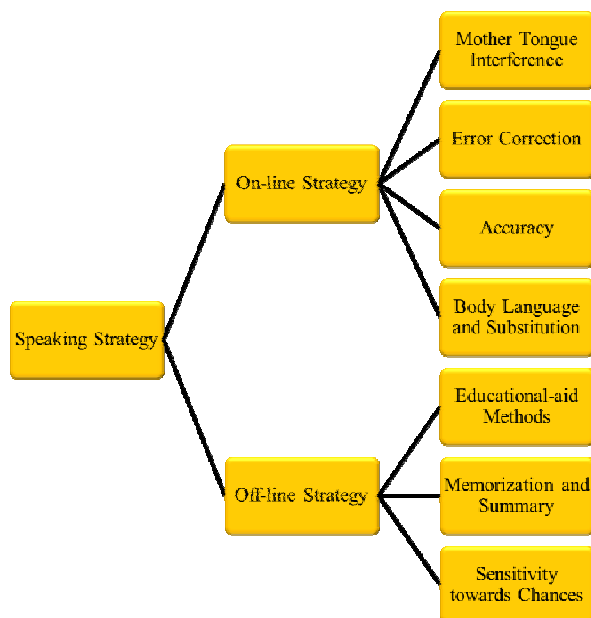
5.1 Implications and suggestions for further research
This study has promising implications for EFL learners and instructors,
as well as syllabus designers.

First, it is evident that the use of strategies by learners is the key to
their learning in general and their speaking ability in particular. By taking
these strategies into account, the source of their possible inabilities in

speaking can be determined; thus, they will be able to take necessary measures in order to alleviate any potential problems.

Second, once EFL instructors become aware of the strategies used by language learners, they will be able to detect the use of ineffective strategies and teach them more effective ones to increase their ability in speaking and consequently their learners' motivation to be better speakers of the target language.

Third, it is helpful if syllabus designers prepare materials in a way that is complementary to the weak points of learners and incorporates those activities that can aid EFL learners in applying effective strategies in language learning and especially oral production. In other words, it can be said that the strategy instruction should be regarded as an inevitable aspect of language teaching and should be included in EFL materials.

All in all, the number of studies on speaking English as a foreign language is limited, and the need for further research into this area is obvious. This need is even more apparent in the EFL context of Iran where the number of those interested in this skill is so large, but lack of exposure to native speakers of English has made the learning process of this productive and spontaneous skill a challenging one.

As a result, a number of areas in which interested researchers can conduct further studies are presented in this part.

1) With regard to the relationship between L1 and L2 speaking ability, researchers can conduct a study to find out which L1 strategies best assist L2 speaking ability.

2) Considering the disappointing situation of English speaking in Iran, other studies can be conducted with the aim of finding more effective methods of teaching this skill as well as relevant strategies in EFL schools, institutes and even universities.

3) It would be useful to do a study in which some learner variables like age, field of study, years of studying English, social class, cultural background, and their possible interactions are investigated with regard to L2 speaking ability.

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Appendix A
Speaking Strategy Questionnaire

Student Name:………………   Sex: Female   Male   Level:………

When I speak English:

   1) I think in Persian then I translate it into English.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   2) Communication is very important for me even if I don't use correct grammar.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   3) If I have time, first I write, and then I speak.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   4) I am worried about making mistakes and I feel shy when I make a mistake.

 Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   5) I correct myself whenever I make an error.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   6) I correct only big errors and ignore slips of tongue.

 Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   7) If I forget a word, I explain the word in English or use synonyms.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   8) I use gestures (body language) to express myself better.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

To improve my speaking ability:

   9. I read newspaper and books in order to learn new structures and words.

 Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   10. I memorize the dialogs to use the structures.

 Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   11. I give the summary of the dialogs or the texts in my own words.

 Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   12. I speak English with my teacher and friends after class.

 Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

   13. I practice reading English texts aloud.

 Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

14. I listen to radio or recordings.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

15. I repeat after listening to radio, recordings or music.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

16. I watch films or TV programs in English.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

17. When my teacher asks questions in class, I try to answer him/her
    mentally to myself.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

18. When my friends speak in class, I try to check their errors and correct
    them mentally.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

19. When listening to my teachers or people who are good at English, I am
    careful about the structures, words and idioms that they use, and I try to
    use them in my speech.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

20. I use English to English dictionary to improve my pronunciation and
    learn new words.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

21. I try to relax whenever I speak English.

Strongly agree   agree   no idea   disagree   strongly disagree

GOOD LUCK